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AUTHOR Mason, Susan A.
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ABSTRACT

For those involved in research of any type, the gathering of complete, relevant, and untainted information is the ultimate goal. The collection of valuable information is particularly challenging in the social sciences, which often call for qualitative field research. The effective field research interviewer must not only be knowledgeable of the theoretical background of a given study, but must also be well versed and practiced in a wide variety of communication skills. Beginning in 1970, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have emerged as a major vehicle for prevention and treatment of alcohol, drug, and other emotional health problems in the workplace. In 1985, to meet a perceived need for quality education in the core tasks of EAP work and to study the socialization processes associated with this work, Cornell University together with the New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse launched the Employee Assistance Education and Research Program (EAERP). For the research program, three researchers conducted interviews with 278 people who had either graduated from EAERP, dropped out, inquired about the program, or obtained jobs in employee assistance. To prepare participants to be EAP interviewers, weekly research meetings conducted over a 3-year period served as dress rehearsals. Potential participants were persuaded to participate through appeals to trust, credibility, logic, and emotion. Interview strategies varied with the participants. Data collected in the study is still being analyzed, and results of the research effort are anticipated by 1991. (SG)

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COMMUNICATION PROCESSES IN THE FIELD RESEARCH INTERVIEW SETTING: A CASE STUDY

Susan A. Mason, M.A., M.S.

Smithers Institute for Alcohol and Workplace Studies
School of Industrial and Labor Relations
Cornell University

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For those of us who are involved in research of any type, gathering information that will be complete, relevant and untainted is the ultimate goal. This is especially true in the social sciences where looking at human interaction and social systems usually means getting close to the data through qualitative field research. Within this realm, one of the most rewarding and perhaps most difficult methods of gathering data is the field research interview. In order to utilize this method, the researcher must not only be knowledgeable of the theoretical background of the study, but must also be well versed and practiced in a wide variety of communication skills. The field research interview is not, as some researchers observe, merely a stimulus/response event. As Mishler (1986) notes: "the interview is a form of discourse....shaped and organized by asking and answering questions. The record of an interview that we researchers make and then use in our work of analysis and interpretation is a representation of that talk. How we make that representation and the analytic procedures we apply to it reveal our theoretical assumptions and presuppositions about relations between discourse and meaning." The field research interview is a dynamic, non-linear process which uses active listening and empathetic interpersonal skills to generate grounded theory.

This paper will discuss the execution of a research project (n=278) utilizing the research interview method in the field. The first section will discuss research interviewing methods and

approaches. Next there will be a description of the research project and its methodological rational. Lastly, there will be a summary of how the research team (of which I was a member) prepared for and enacted research interviews in the field.

THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Conducting structured research in an unstructured setting is the ultimate challenge to the field researcher. The uniformity of nature is a reasonable assumption in the world of physical objects and their characteristics, but in the area of social behavior such assumptions are not warranted. Human nature is much more complex than the sum of its many discrete elements (Best and Kahn, 1986). To further compound this situation, communication acts-like other acts-do not have single consequences. They have multiple consequences. Each can have, at one and the same time, both intended and unintended, manifest and latent, practical and expressive, and functional and dysfunctional consequences (Trice and Beyer, 1984). Also, from a cultural perspective all actions, whether intentionally communicative or not have the potential of expressing meaning that is, of communicating (Beyer and Trice, 1988).

Amazingly, out of this apparent chaos develops the richness and "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the research interview method. If it is viewed as a form of discourse in which (1) research interviews are speech events; (2) the discourse of interviews is constructed jointly by interviewers and

respondents; (3) analysis and interpretation are based on a theory of discourse and meaning; (4) the meanings of questions and answers are contextually grounded, (Mishler, 1986; Glasser and Strauss, 1967) then the power of the data collected in the interview setting will be significant.

The research interview method offers several useful approaches, such as clinical, ethnographic, survey and life-history. The survey research method is the most well-developed and widely used interview method. It is directive in nature and because it features a standard format of interview schedules and an emphasis on fixed response categories combined with systematic methods, it is regarded as a close approximation to the dominant model of scientific research (Mishler, 1986). The clinical, ethnographic and life-history research interview approaches are more non-directive featuring a structure that is not fixed by predetermined questions but designed to provide the informant with freedom to introduce materials that are not anticipated by the interviewer (Whyte, 1960). Clearly, use of the research interview method in the field requires a bit of ingenuity, flexibility and persistence (Hathaway, Mason and Sonnenstuhl, 1989), but the richness of the data gathered justifies the effort required.

The following chronicles the processes that we as a research team used to collect data from the field via the non-directive research interview approach.

THE PROJECT AND METHOD

DESCRIBING THE PROJECT

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are a major vehicle for the prevention and treatment of alcohol, drug and other emotional health problems within the workplace. Since 1970, thousands of people with a wide range of occupational and educational experiences have become involved in employee assistance work. Because it is considered an emergent occupation, it does not yet have common consensus on what tasks actually constitute EAP work. Therefore, in 1985, Cornell University's Program on Alcoholism and Occupational Health together with the New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol abuse launched a program called the Employee Assistance Education and Research Program (EAERP). The goal of the program was two-fold: (1) to bring quality and consistent education to the EAP workers of New York State by teaching the core tasks of EAP work and the crucial balance between the workplace and the treatment place and, (2) to study the socialization processes associated with the emergent occupation of EAPs. The research program looked to four specific EAP populations: EAERP graduates (n=113), EAERP drop-outs (n=32), EAERP inquirees (n=59), and a sample of New York State Employee Assistance Professional Association members (n=74).

Methodological Rational

Research methods lie along a continuum. On one end are the

qualitative methods such as participant observation and indepth interviewing; on the other are the quantitative ones such as surveys and experiments (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1985; Best and Kahn, 1986). Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

Qualitative methods are strong in understanding the meanings people attach to their behavior, discovering new things about a phenomenon, and generating hypotheses; however, they are weak methods for testing hypotheses. On the other hand, quantitative methods are strong in testing hypotheses and generating new ones but weak in understanding peoples' interpretations, and discovering new insights. Research that uses a sequence of qualitative techniques to first illuminate the phenomenon and the quantitative ones to test the generated hypotheses usually offer the most supportable results. Research then is a process in which hypotheses are continuously tested, modified, and clarified (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1985).

In the process of selecting the appropriate research methodology for this study, we as researchers continually asked two questions. Which method(s) will (1) increase the validity, reliability, and generalizability of data generated and (2) maximize the amount of useful data generated on the question? As a response to these questions, some researchers advocate combining methods. This idea is called "triangulation" (Denzin, 1978; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest, 1966) and is similar to navigators taking several different citings in order to determine where they are. In so doing, researchers attempt to

balance the inherent weaknesses and strengths of methods.

To address these points in the EAERP project we used several qualitative methods, including program histories, participant observations and research interviews. This triangulation of methods insured that our emergent concepts and hypotheses would be valid. Later, these concepts will be converted into a survey instrument in order to statistically test the hypotheses. This process of moving from qualitative field observations to instrument building and administration will help insure that the final data are both valid and reliable.

Throughout the project we used three investigators to collect and analyze the data. Such investigator triangulation insures that the data is reliable because multiple researchers (i.e., similar instruments) listen to and observe the same phenomenon. This reduces potential biases that may be introduced inadvertently by an individual investigator.

Finally, as described earlier, we used data triangulation by collecting the data from 4 different EAP populations. The differences in these populations can be used to test the validity and reliability of the data. For example, validity could be tested by comparing the data obtained under similar circumstances and reliability could be tested by comparing data obtained under different circumstances (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1985).

The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is being used to analyze the data. This method is designed to develop rich descriptions of a social phenomenon, to make new

discoveries about it, to generate hypotheses and theory about it, and to provisionally test those hypotheses and theory. The constant comparative method produces theory that practitioners can apply to their work prior to further rigorous testing. At the same time, survey researchers can easily adapt the theory for more rigorous testing (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1985).

USING THE FIELD RESEARCH INTERVIEW

PREPARING TO ENTER THE FIELD

Before we embarked on this study, it was first necessary that we become sufficiently socialized to the role of field researcher. This process was primarily accomplished during weekly meetings devoted to the development of research methodology. Here we discussed various details of the field research interview experience.

Several of our weekly research meetings were used as "dress rehearsals" for the field experience. Under the merciless scrutiny of the more seasoned members of our research team and, worse yet, a painfully honest video camera, team members took turns role-playing the interview guidelines. In order to emulate a real-life interview within this artificial environment, it was emphatically stressed that no participating actor was to break role under any circumstances. If we broke role we were, "just wasting time." So fully armed with tape recorder, interview guidelines, each researcher would alternately conduct an

interview, act the part of the interviewee, and constructively observe and discuss the efforts of fellow team members.

The interview instrument itself was not a simple, structured survey; rather, it consisted of a series of open-ended guidelines designed to encourage research participants to elaborate on their ideas and experiences relative to EAPs. When administered, it could last from thirty minutes to an hour and a half or longer, depending on the duration of the interviewee's EAP experience. The researcher's major role during the interview was to present the guidelines and - most importantly - listen. The progression of the interview depended enormously on the content of the participant's responses. Often the nature of the interview was such that the guidelines were more logically explored out of sequence. As the interviewee addressed a guideline, it was the researchers responsibility to verbally probe for more information. It was also left to the researcher's discretion to decide when a guideline was fully exhausted and, subsequently, introduce another guideline.

If the participant strayed from the pertinent areas of interest - as they often did - the researcher had to learn to politely interrupt and refocus the conversation. However, since the purpose of this study was discovery, it was sometimes difficult to discern whether an interviewee was off the subject entirely or disclosing fresh insights. To manage this dilemma, researchers had to continually resolve the question, "What guideline am I on?" Unless the answer was "none," or time was

running short, there was usually no need to interfere with the dialogue.

Through these repeated attempts at role playing, we researchers were granted the opportunity to experience a variety of situations which could actually arise in the field and develop strategies for handling these uncertainties. Without question, role-playing proved to be an effective training exercise, as well as a tremendous confidence builder. When the time arrived to meet the "real-life" subject, the interview process was comfortable and familiar.

FINDING THE SAMPLE

Now it was time to find the sample and, here again, our communication skills came into play as we utilized the telephone. After using an elaborate process to select and track down the sample we would (hopefully) get our research subject on the phone. In our efforts to persuade our sample to participate we employed persuasive strategies focusing on ethos, pathos and logos. For example, after we introduced ourselves - emphasizing our affiliation with Cornell University and the New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (trust and credibility for this audience) - we'd generally explain the research program, its potential impact on the EAP field (logic) and our how critically important their experiences and ideas relating to EAP were for the success of the study and the occupation (emotional appeal). The overall process of scheduling these interviews

could also be compared in some respects to telesales. We were asking people to "buy" our interview: the cost was roughly one hour of their time. For some folks in our sample this was equivalent to over a hundred dollars. Our job was to demonstrate that the benefits of our "product" was worth their investment. Beyond our Cornell business card and a thank you letter, there was little to offer the participant, so we appealed to their sense of compassion and dedication to the EAP field: "Your unique viewpoints and experiences are vitally important to furthering EAP education and research." That statement was worth it's weight in gold.

A vital strategy for closing sales is to learn to anticipate objections. Though these objections did vary, we found several responses that were most effective in swaying the research subject to participate. "Your present occupation may not be directly related to EAP work, but some of our most valuable and innovative insights have come from people like you who are not directly in EAP work." It had the right appeal!

In order to accommodate the frenzied schedules and time shortages characteristic of may EAPers, flexibility was invaluable. Additionally, like good salesperson, we had to learn to "speak the many languages" of the broad range of occupational and professional groups we encountered. Though we avoided stereotyping any one particular group or occupation, we did need to quickly "read" the signals we were receiving from the setting and the interviewee and adjust our communication strategies

appropriately. This influenced what we'd say and how we'd say it so that we could maximize our chances of gaining the participant's cooperation.

We also knew that one important way to gain cooperation from this particular sample was to show our respect for and application of confidentiality throughout the entire research process. Because we were taping the exchange, we had to deal with this question and concern immediately or we would not (1) get the interview or (2) not get much out of the interview. In reality this must be a major issue for any researcher. In this case, elaborate measures have been taken to secure these materials and maintain the anonymity of the interviewee.

Of course, letters of confirmation were sent to all interviewees reiterating all of the main points discussed thus far.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

As already noted, EAP workers and enthusiast lurk in a wide variety of habitats. Needless to say the setting not only tells you a great amount about the organization and the circumstances of the EAP within the organization but also decides how the interview will be conducted. Battered metal trailers in a Buffalo tire factory to plushly carpeted Madison Avenue suites offered unique challenges. But not all interviews were conducted at the interviewees worksite. Sometimes "neutral locations" were selected such as hotel lobbies, a restaurant or the participant's

home. Generally, interviews conducted outside of a worksite took on a less formal, more relaxed air and thus participants seemed to share more detail and personal feelings. On the other hand, when interviews were conducted at the worksite, the "professional" work roles inserted themselves into the interview. Though neither type of setting necessarily gave us "better" information than the other, it did give us interesting insights into how people view their work, organization and themselves within the worksite.

ADMINISTERING AND ADAPTING THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

After arriving at the interview site, checking our tape recorder and sharing a handshake, the researcher once again needed to mentally consider what he/she knew about the interviewee and what "language" should be spoken. We began with a review of all the points presented in the phone interaction with a special emphasis on their importance in the project - their uniqueness. One of the most unpredictable portions of the interview process was this introductory phase - the time prior to the introduction of the first guideline. This was when we needed to tactfully gain control of the conversation and establish a working rapport with the participant. Depending on the participant, different strategies would be applied to secure our role in the interview. Usually by the time we had discussed codes, confidentiality and tested the tape recorder, the interviewee was "all ears" and ready to cooperate. It was almost

as though all this research jargon symbolized that they were engaged in "real" research - something unique and special. In fact, some became solemn, eager and intent: they had been given a mission!

As noted, the tactical role adopted at each interview varied depending upon the nature of the interviewee. Our core identity was always that of the scientific researcher. Yet, sometimes it was useful to become more of a student, especially with knowledgeable, talkative folks who had a great deal to contribute. Naive, quiet, or insecure types required more guidance and direction on our part and responded better to an interviewer who acted more like an "EAP authority". There were those who had rather strong-willed and domineering personalities. They required a lot of guidance during the course of the discussion because they tended to stray in order to share their own pet theories or knowledge. A fairly effective strategy used with these folks was to appear rather naive and ask lots of simplistic questions in an effort to make sure we kept their story straight and ideas focused.

Luckily, these 278 interviews were conducted over a three year period of time by three researchers, because burn-out in this setting was rampant. The energy needed in the actual interview to listen, to choose the right role and "language" to guide the participant, to probe for more information as appropriate, to deal with the environment presented by the setting and to maximize the time spent together to gather as much

information as possible was enormous.

ANALYSIS

We are now in the process of analyzing the data collected in EAERP with the assistance of the main-frame qualitative research program, QUALOG. QUALOG was created under the basic assumption that the virtual memory and storage capacity of a mainframe computer can process many more megabytes of information than the memory of virtually any human being. The programs basic function is to efficiently organize, search, and sort coded data and memos generated during researcher analysis. Once researchers are relieved of these mechanical burdens, they are able to focus more clearly on conceptual tasks, which are the heart of qualitative research. Results of this research effort are anticipated in 1991.

SUMMARY

As more researchers enact qualitative research and utilize the field research interview approach, methods for assessing and evaluating the adequacy of particular studies will be developed. Questions about the objectivity, reliability, validity and replicability of findings-the standard issues of scientific research-will continue to be asked, but answers will take a form appropriate to the methods applied to the research question versus the mainstream model (Mishler, 1986). It will be in this environment that analysis and theory generation will become reflective of the human discourse on which it is built.

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